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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of research findings concerning the stresses experienced by Southeast Asian refugees undergoing acculturation in the United States. Sources of stress are briefly described, including worries about family and others left behind in Southeast Asia, underemployment and unemployment, cultural conflicts, changing family roles, and social disruption. Findings on problems specific to high risk groups--adolescents, child arrivals between the ages of 9 and 15, and persons who have undergone shifting role identities (such as the loss of professional status) are given special focus. Studies on the relationship between stress and children's age of migration are summarized, and some information on student needs and reasons for student misbehavior is given. (KH)

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The Social and Psychological Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees

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The Social and Psychological Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees

The first obstacle to be overcome by every Southeast Asian refugee is learning English. A second important and related problem for refugees is that of social and psychological adjustment. As with any family, the general well-being of refugee parents influences the school behavior of their children. However, in the case of refugees, acculturation often creates specific stresses that make it difficult for parents to give children the emotional support they need.

Sources of Stress

Decreasing dependence on welfare with each year in this country, a far lower criminal record than the general population, good school behavior of their children, and the creation of active networks and cultural societies all indicate that Southeast Asians are adjusting remarkably successfully to this country. Still, specific sources of stress do detract from their sense of well-being and are likely to cause depression, anxiety, hostility, somatic symptoms, or paranoia.

The War and Evacuation Many refugees are beset by worries about those left behind. According to one study, even after five years, 81% still had serious concerns about being separated from missing family members; 67% had painful memories of the war and their departure from home; 59% were homesick; and 58% were worried about difficulties in communicating with those in their home country (12).

Underemployment and Unemployment All work carries with it role identities and self-esteem. Individuals who had high status in Southeast Asia are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and stress over their current, usually lower status, occupations in the United States (5). This stress is particularly evident among Vietnamese who were professionals in their own country (13). A study of mental health among the Hmong of Wisconsin indicates that stress was most likely to occur among herbal healers and farmers—whose occupations were difficult to transfer to their new home (15).

Cultures in Contact The Southeast Asian emphasis on shame or "losing face" prevents many refugees from expressing stress, asking questions, reaching out for help, or even speaking up with complaints that might embarrass others. At the same time, the American emphasis on conformity includes a belief that American (often local) ways are best and that only stupidity or stubbornness would prevent a newcomer from adapting (7).

Changing Roles Within the Family Three instances of breakdown in traditional male-female relations have created stress in the home and special problems for women: (1) Some Southeast Asian groups that were polygamous in their own countries must now find ways to adjust to American mores. (2) Many women suffered physical abuse and rape during the war and in the refugee camps. (3) The need to supplement family income has forced women, who did not work in Southeast Asia, to seek employment. Though this new "freedom" is generally valued by the women, it undermines traditional patriarchal authority. Because women are particularly at risk in these and other instances, Crandall et al. (6) suggest creating home-based programs in which women alone can get together to discuss their problems and learn new ways of coping.

Intergenerational stress is also likely to arise as children enter school and learn English and new American ways. Although parents rely on their children for this cultural knowledge, this reliance upsets traditional lines of authority. Some research indicates that the more rapidly the children acculturate, the more likely is the occurrence of conflict (1, 7, 14). Poor adjustment and low achievement in school, especially after a satisfactory start, may actually reflect this family conflict (2).

Clearly, cultural differences are such that the American school cannot be an extension of the home for refugee children (14). Because of the family's importance in Southeast Asian culture, school counselors should immediately bring in the parents, act in a respectful but authoritative manner (Southeast Asians are used to formality and well-defined roles), and, when an interpreter is needed, choose an older person, preferably someone the family chooses (2).

Social Disruption or Lack of Social Ties Southeast Asians who are isolated from their families and ethnic communities face greater adjustment difficulties. Moreover, refugees who belong to ethnic groups which have relatively fewer members resettled in the United States (e.g., the Khmer) have more difficulty adjusting than do groups like the Vietnamese who have a larger representation in this country (5). A study of Hmong in Wisconsin showed those refugees who had moved more than once to have more depression, somatization, anxiety and hostility (16). Contact with a sponsor—which tended to be disrupted with moves—was also associated with better mental health.

Among Vietnamese in Baton Rouge, stress was related to social isolation resulting from language barriers, local prejudice toward Vietnamese, and Vietnamese prejudice toward other Southeast Asians and the local community (13). Racial tensions between Southeast Asian and American public high school students in Southern California decreased as contact increased between the two groups; increased contact, in turn, was dependent on the English language skills of the refugee students (11).

Since the literature shows social isolation and family separation to be major causes of emotional problems, Stein (12) argues that a "first priority" should be to help create stable ethnic communities. However, Stein provides a word of caution: Although ethnic clusters create support systems, ease the shock of transition, and provide group identity, where there is competition for jobs and housing, ethnic clustering can also provoke hostility and even racism.

Groups at Risk

Adolescent refugees who arrived in the United States alone had often had problems in Asia, and, though they used the exodus to solve family conflicts, their migration actually exacerbated their tendency toward emotional distress (17). Once here, adolescents living in single-parent families and in rural environments, isolated from peers, are most likely to experience stress.

Charron and Ness (4), studying Vietnamese in Connecticut, suggest that the three best predictors of adolescent emotional distress are: being female; not getting along with American classmates; and not getting along with parents.

A study of Southeast Asian children in the Los Angeles and Orange County public schools suggests that children of "the last wave" of immigration have more emotional difficulty than those

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of earlier waves "because of the atrocities they saw in the seas and in the camps before coming to the United States" (10, p.21).

Finally, people who have undergone shifting role identities, such as the loss of professional status, are particularly at risk for stress (13). Among a group of Vietnamese in Seattle (8), the greatest stress, as judged by the Cornell Medical Index, occurred among widowed or separated female heads of families. Stress was also high in men over 46 (where "status inconsistencies" resulted from nontransferable skills) and in men under 21. Women of reproductive age, who either were faced with the responsibilities of both child-rearing and jobs, or who felt alienated from the new culture because of staying at home, were also under particular stress. Westermeyer et al. (16) found that among the Hmong, both men and women over 45—those with the most developed role identities in their home countries—were most likely to be depressed.

Stress and Children's Age of Migration

Based on her studies of Southeast Asian refugees as well as other refugee populations, Carlin (3) offers several hypotheses concerning the age of migration and its attendant stresses for children.

Very young infants who arrived in the United States with their families have no memory of their country, the camps, or the trip. Infants arriving between six months and two years present a unique problem. They seem to adjust quickly and well, but their memories are preverbal and for the most come out only in nightmares. Since there is no way to deal with these preverbal memories, they may persist indefinitely, and this group may prove to have the most severe problems.

Children who arrived between twelve months and three years were in a period of rapid language acquisition, which was often disrupted or even stopped by trauma. Furthermore, these children changed language and habit systems before they were old enough to conceptualize the differences. Thus they are susceptible to language-learning problems and related neurotic behavior.

Children who were between three- and ten-years-old when they arrived will have memories of their country, the war, and the long, difficult trip, as well as of their original language, food and customs. They will learn English as a second language, and their experiences of trauma and change can be dealt with verbally.

The adjustment of youth who were between nine and fifteen at the time of arrival will be compounded by the identity confusions of adolescence. Conflicts about being Southeast Asian or American—betraying one for the other—are often shown by limit-testing: "I'm Vietnamese. These are American rules."

Orientation and Counseling in the Schools

A new refugee student in an American school is beset daily by questions such as: What are these people trying to tell me? Why do they laugh at me? What does the teacher want me to do with these papers? Who do I ask for help? (1). School personnel need to take "a little bit more time" when doing anything with a Southeast Asian student. They should be empathetic, gentle, and speak softly (using hand gestures when necessary).

Specifically, new students will need information on

- the structure of the academic system
- options in various educational programs
- how academic performance is graded
- rules of behavior for the school and with peers
- assistance in conflicts with parents
- ways to share their culture with their classmates.

Teachers and counselors need to be aware of critical areas of possible cultural conflict, such as more rapid rates of assimilation and language learning by children than by their parents (7); cultural differences in learning styles (though what is studied at a given grade level is remarkably similar in Southeast Asia and the United States, the method of teaching differs considerably); and different styles of social relationships (the apparently inappropriate smile of a Southeast Asian child may be his or her cultural way of expressing embarrassment).

When a Southeast Asian student misbehaves, this misbehavior may be the result of one or more of the following sources of tension (9):

- frustration due to language problems and misunderstandings
- imitation out of a desire for rapid adaptation
- behavior learned in refugee camps where survival was paramount and included stealing and violent self-defense
- intragroup historical animosity among various Southeast Asian groups
- adjustment difficulties because school rules here are less strict and well-defined
- culture-gap in the family resulting from different rates of assimilation.

Liu et al. (9) recommend a well-thought-out system of support, prevention, warning and punishment. Among the activities aimed at support and prevention are special counseling; making teachers and Southeast Asian and American students aware of the cultural differences; planning activities to improve communication between Southeast Asians and other students; and giving clear strong roles to bilingual instructional aides.

When infractions do occur, students should be handled fairly, as school staff would handle any student. First infractions should be responded to with warnings. Since Indochinese parents are concerned and deeply involved in their children's education, parents should be contacted, and an explanation should be given of what has happened. Finally, native speakers should be used whenever the problems are serious or there is the possibility of cultural and/or linguistic misunderstandings.

—Carol Ascher

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